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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#) [ENRG](#) [KCOR](#) [JM](#) [XL](#)  
SUBJECT: JAMAICA: "SISTER P" MARKS ONE YEAR AS PRIME MINISTER

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- [I](#)B. 06 KING 0402
- [I](#)C. 06 KINGSTON 1286
- [I](#)D. 06 KINGSTON 1298
- [I](#)E. 06 KINGSTON 1342
- [I](#)F. 06 KINGSTON 1579
- [I](#)G. KINGSTON 0089
- [I](#)H. KINGSTON 0215
- [I](#)I. KINGSTON 0393
- [I](#)J. 06 KINGSTON 2189
- [I](#)K. 06 KINGSTON 2021
- [I](#)L. KINGSTON 0342
- [I](#)M. KINGSTON 0413
- [I](#)N. 03 KINGSTON 0991
- [I](#)O. KINGSTON 0158
- [I](#)P. KINGSTON 0186

Classified By: AMB Brenda LaGrange Johnson for Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

**11. (C) SUMMARY:** Portia Simpson Miller (PSM), the unelected Prime Minister of Jamaica, rose to the head of the ruling People's National Party (PNP) last February. As PNP leader, she replaced the retiring elected Prime Minister P.J. Patterson to become the country's first female Prime Minister on March 30, 2006. During the past year, however, PSM has been rocked by scandal and plagued by questions of her overall competence, and regularly has avoided interaction with members of the media. Additionally, her apparent unwillingness to address corruption within the PNP has contributed to a steady decline in her poll numbers. Appearing to understand that she has failed to capitalize on the sheer goodwill engendered by her rise to lead the PNP, PSM has avoided all commitment to calling an election (constitutionally due no later than October 2007). Whether or not "Sister P" can retain the Prime Ministership depends largely on her ability to rally the PNP faithful, as she has done so skillfully in the past. End Summary.

The Birth of "Sister P"

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**12. (C)** PSM's political career has always been full of surprises. Born in rural St. Catherine, one of eight children, PSM grew up in a poor, fundamentalist household. She completed both primary and secondary school; however, her highest level of education is a diploma in secretarial skills. She insists that she did pass the Jamaican "O" levels and could have attended a university if she had wanted to. She worked as a secretary from 1965 through 1974 and was named as the PNP candidate for a parish councilor position in what was then a Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) stronghold. Unexpectedly, she won and has since carried the aura of a formidable grassroots organizer. In 1976, she ran for the PNP against the sitting JLP in Southwest St. Andrew - another

long-standing JLP stronghold. Walking through the roughest parts of town, meeting with anyone who would sit down with her, she easily won the seat and cemented her reputation as someone born of - and connected to - "the people." The election was also notable for the number of over-votes cast. Although no charges of ballot stuffing were filed (as the constituency was won by a large enough margin), her connection to corruption was born (ref A).

¶ 3. (C) By 1978, PSM was named one of four party Vice Presidents and given the portfolio of women's affairs. She also was named parliamentary secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister that year. Despite the JLP's victory in nation-wide elections and their return to power, she was re-elected in 1980. Again, over-voting plagued her district, with 106.6 percent of eligible voters casting ballots. PSM boycotted the 1983 elections, but returned to government from the same constituency in 1989 when the PNP returned to power. PSM became Minister for Labor, Welfare and Sports. PSM has been the President of the PNP Women's Movement since 1983 and has supported equal pay for equal work, minimum wage for all labor (particularly domestic helpers), the abolishment of identifying children legally as "bastards," maternity leave, and the elevation of the Bureau of Women's Affairs to ministry level (ref A).

¶ 4. (U) Despite her accomplishments and the fact that she has never lost an election, PSM has consistently fended off criticism of her weak educational background by turning it to her advantage, emphasizing her working-class roots and birth in abject poverty. This, she argues, makes her more accessible to all Jamaicans. Those who dwell on her lack of education are routinely dismissed as wealthy elites who have a strong interest in making sure the poor remain poor. Her background has made her seem like an "anywoman" - someone who

could live next door or run a patti stand (a Jamaican sandwich) - has spawned nicknames of endearment such as Aunti Portia and more commonly, "Sister P."

¶ 5. (C) In February 2006, PSM's most impressive victory unfolded when she defeated the PNP's heir apparent - Peter Phillips - for control of the PNP and the Prime Ministership in the wake of P.J. Patterson's retirement. Phillips is a longtime party stalwart and was heavily favored to emerge victorious. Her victory, another surprise, came despite the fact that she skipped the only debate among the PNP contenders. In fact, her last debate occurred in 1992 against Patterson when she challenged him for party leadership (ref B). It appears that PSM learned a valuable lesson regarding unscripted appearances, as her 1992 debate performance was universally judged as poor.

¶ 6. (U) PSM's victory briefly united Jamaicans as they reveled in the historic elevation of a woman to the Prime Ministership. "It's woman time now," went the slogan. PSM's ratings (and the PNP's) soared in response to her victory. Her working-class background also provided a sense that she would better understand the needs of the poor than any previous Prime Minister.

Sister P Promises Hope for Jamaica - "Together We Can Make It"

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¶ 7. (U) PSM's inaugural address on March 30, 2006, laden with references to God, was based on hope for a new Jamaica. Using her own life story as the backdrop to the overall message that any Jamaican can become what they aspire to be, the Prime Minister outlined her vision for Jamaica under her leadership. She pledged adherence to human rights and liberty for all, regardless of education, class, color, or gender. This pledge stood in sharp contrast to the Prime Ministers who came before her and as a pointed comment to those who questioned whether her educational background had fully prepared her for her new role. She pledged to attack corruption and crime while increasing employment opportunities and creating more opportunities for

wealth-creation. PSM also argued for increasing the quality of education, stating that Jamaica will become a first-class society only if/when Jamaica becomes an educated and knowledge-based society. Finally, she pledged her support for strengthening CARICOM and working closely with the JLP. She stated that she would carry on the tradition of consensus-building begun by P.J. Patterson and called on all members of both parties to "...put the people's hopes and aspirations before our own interests."

#### Hope Replaced by Scandal and Doubt

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¶8. (U) PSM did not call general elections following her elevation to Prime Minister and instead embarked on a series of mis-steps and scandals. In June, an island-wide cement crisis resulted in as many as 30,000 construction workers becoming temporarily unemployed. While the tariff system that served as an impetus for the scandal occurred prior to her becoming Prime Minister, it was instituted by one of her senior Cabinet members, and PSM was seen as protecting her inner-circle from criticism instead of protecting "the workers" she claimed to represent (ref C).

¶9. (C) The use (or misuse) of Petrocaribe funds has led to allegations that Petrocaribe dollars are used as a giant "slush" fund with little or no transparency or accountability (refs D and E). There also have been public claims that President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela is trying to influence the outcome of the upcoming elections (as well as the direction of the GOJ itself) (refs F, G and H). Perhaps sensing the public perception, PSM deftly handled Chavez during the latter's recent visit to Jamaica. He was denied tickets to the opening ceremony of the Cricket World Cup (CWC) and was only given a polite response to his request for Jamaica to join ALBA (the Bolivian Alternative for the Americas or Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas) and forego the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas). Nevertheless, allegations abound that the PNP is receiving funding almost exclusively from Chavez for party functions, including PSM's campaign for re-election (ref I).

¶10. (C) More minor scandals include an on-going probe into irregularities in contracts with the government that was prompted by the Whitehouse Hotel scandal (ref F). The Director of Public Prosecutions has prepared 45 cases of contract violations to date; more may follow. PSM also was

caught "doodling" by a cameraman during a parliamentary debate. This, combined with her continued avoidance of press conferences, media interviews, and the cancellation of meetings with the EU Commissioner and the Vatican on a recent trip to Europe has re-ignited the belief that PSM is a "lightweight" who is not capable of effectively governing a nation (ref J).

¶11. (C) Perhaps PSM's most damaging scandal has been Trafigura. Prior to the PNP party convention, the PNP accepted 31 million JD (approximately 475,000 USD) from Dutch-based oil trading firm Trafigura Beheer. PSM had met with an official of the company in NY previously. The money subsequently was deposited in an account named CCOC - which stood for Colin Campbell Our Candidate. Colin Campbell was then-Minister of Information and Development. According to the PNP, this was a campaign donation (ref K); according to Trafigura Beheer, it was payment for future services. When first disclosed (by JLP leader Bruce Golding), PNP again insisted it was a donation. Gradually, the obvious could no longer be ignored, and PNP promised to repay the money. That repayment allegedly took place in February; however, the JLP has questioned whether, and how, the payment was made. PNP officials first insisted the payment was made in a traditional way (from one bank account to another), but Trafigura Beheer insisted it had been made by courier. Then, no one could produce evidence that it had been made at all. When specifically asked for documentary proof to show the money had been returned, PSM refused to offer any details.

The Government of the Netherlands reportedly has suggested it is willing to send investigators to Jamaica to look into the dealings, but must have GOJ permission to enter the country; permission has not been granted. And, while Campbell gave up his Ministerial position, he remains in the Senate.

Recently, when Golding asked PSM to explain why Campbell remained in the Senate, she responded, "that was within his own guilt." This scandal will not fade away and there have been suggestions from Golding that more damaging information will follow (in all likelihood, whatever information remains will be released by Golding after elections are called).

#### Pledges Fulfilled?

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¶12. (U) Beyond the scandals, PSM has moved towards meeting some of the pledges outlined in her inaugural address. She committed herself to a market-driven economy while maintaining the PNP's long-standing commitment to social justice for the poor, a policy she refers to as "balancing books while balancing lives." This, she believes, is a moral imperative. She pledged to appoint a religious community member to every public sector board for purposes of "transparency" and due to her belief that "...it is from our deep spiritual and moral base that we can develop the strong economy..." Jamaica did maintain single-digit inflation and witnessed a decline in interest rates in 2006.

¶13. (U) PSM also undertook an increase in the amount of Government-provided services to Jamaicans. For example, under the Inner-city Housing Programme, a total of 1086 housing units were handed out to residents in Trench Town and Denham Town. The National Housing Trust revised its loan terms to allow contributors to borrow against 100 percent of their contributions. Sugar workers are being provided with 2,754 housing units. 160 new educational posts have been created. There was a 100 percent increase in the number of youths provided free training in the National Youth Service. 72,000 persons are now covered under the National Health Fund with an additional 123,000 covered under the Jamaica Drugs for the Elderly Programme. 183,000 persons participated in the Programme for Advancement through Health and Education (PATH), which provides conditional health and educational grants for poor children ages 0-17. Beneficiaries are required to make regular visits to health clinics and to comply with 85 percent school attendance to maintain their benefits. Finally, 27,000 Jamaicans have had water connections to their homes.

¶14. (SBU) Evidence of strengthening CARICOM is more ethereal. In preparation for the CWC, Jamaica along with other host nations developed a common visa that allowed holders access to any of the participating nations. This visa, however, is only good through the CWC. The largest test for Jamaica's aspirations in CARICOM and PSM thus far has been its ongoing spat with Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) over the sale of liquified natural gas (LNG). T&T originally promised to supply LNG to Jamaica but subsequently reneged, leaving open the possibility of Venezuela becoming the largest energy supplier in CARICOM. PSM had personally traveled to T&T in May 2006 to cement the deal for LNG, making T&T's withdrawal a personal failure for PSM (ref L)

¶15. (C) Most disappointing of all is her performance (or lack therefore) on combating crime and corruption. While the murder rate did drop in 2006, the first few months of 2007 have been alarming. January witnessed an increase in murders with a particularly disturbing number of police being killed. On-going murders have captured the public's attention based on their sheer shock value (such as a two-year-old being killed) or their notoriety (Pakistan's cricket coach was murdered following his teams elimination from the CWC, ref M). Coupled with crime are the allegations of corruption at the highest levels of government - including the close association of criminals with members of the PNP, including PSM. From her first election, PSM has been linked to corruption. The long-standing collaboration between

political parties and "dons" has been well documented (ref N). Allegations of "vote-buying" at the PNP national convention (which saw the election of PSM as leader of the PNP) are tame compared to the most recent suggestions of corruption. Golding has alleged that any monies used to repay Trafigura were obtained surreptitiously from Venezuela.

¶16. (C) Peter Phillips - PSM's one-time rival for party control and now the Minister of National Security - has undertaken a plan to attack the dons or, at least, selective dons. In particular, Phillips appears to be targeting those criminals more closely associated with PSM than with other PNP members. The unintended consequence may well be to push PSM closer to Venezuela and cash gifts from Hugo Chavez (used to finance the upcoming election) (ref O).

#### COMMENT AND ANALYSES

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¶17. (C) What a difference a year makes. PSM has watched her poll numbers steadily fall to a point where her PNP is in a dead heat with the JLP in popular support. (Although JLP leader Bruce Golding noted to DAS Duddy on a recent visit to Washington that the JLP is now 8 points ahead of PNP, this number has not been published). The responsibility for this drop rests largely with PSM. She is widely seen as being more willing to protect her inner-circle than ordinary Jamaicans, despite her image as a woman of the people. The cement scandal saw PSM out front defending Industry, Commerce, Science, and Technology Minister Philip Paulwell instead of working towards a fair resolution that protected industry, consumers, and construction workers. In Trafigura, PSM has the power to oust Colin Campbell from the Senate, yet she doesn't seem to want to even offer verbal criticism of him. The protection of her inner-circle is a long-standing charge. This charge is more potent when those she protects are also linked to corruption and criminal enterprise.

¶18. (C) The inner-workings of PSM and her circle have come to light via Golding. He has told the Ambassador that a Phillips supporter in the inner circles of the PNP regularly feeds him confidential information. If true, this information supports earlier assessments that the PNP is still split over who should lead the party and further bolsters Post's earlier report that, irrespective of which party wins the upcoming election, there may be an intra-party battle for control of the PNP (ref P). Post believes that the JLP will report more incriminating information publicly following the announcement of the elections, including more damaging information on Trafigura.

¶19. (C) When that election will be called, however, is still a mystery. Currently, the chattering classes have placed their money on June or July - if the West Indies make it at least to the semi-final round of the CWC. PSM's failure to capitalize on her popularity and goodwill following her elevation to Prime Minister is not a mistake she is likely to repeat. A semi-final finish will negate some of the failings of Jamaica's staging of the CWC, including the lingering feeling that the country could ill-afford the monetary outlay for cricket facilities, roads, the airports, et. al. Granted, the successful opening ceremony at Trelawny on March 11 confounded expectations and filled many Jamaicans with pride. However, against a backdrop of failing schools and the continued crumbling of infrastructure, the CWC looks to some like a luxury intended to impress foreigners. In addition, the much-touted "One Love" Village - an area for music events, small businesses, crafts vendors, etc. - has failed to attract tourists. The GOJ currently is scrambling to find a way to reimburse the vendors who purchased booths for the event. Finally, attendance for the CWC games has been unremarkable - except for games in which the West Indies are playing; most games have been played for audiences of

less than 3,000. This is coupled with recent reports that tourism arrivals have fallen during the CWC. On balance, the CWC does not appear to be the financial windfall that PSM had

hoped.

¶19. (C) The PNP has remained in office since 1989. This, ultimately, may be the only fact that will weigh on voters' minds when deciding PSM's fate. Poloff recently discussed a variety of issues with three working-level PNP members including Karen Cross, Joseph "Bunny" Witter (perennial PNP candidate against Golding), and Randy Mair (in charge of PR and fundraising for the PNP in the Corporate area). Cross had recently delineated concerns among PNP party faithful on PSM's future (ref P). During this meeting, all agreed that Jamaica does not have anything akin to an "independent" voter. Instead, they have "undecided voters," i.e., voters who have a party affiliation, but routinely change depending on their assessment of which party will "deliver the most goods." According to Cross, 13 to 14 percent of the population (close to 20 constituencies in the rural area) fall into this category. While neither the PNP nor the JLP will need to put in anything more than token campaign efforts in most constituencies, they will need to spend considerable money and time in these undecided constituencies. Witter noted that these undecided voters must be shrewdly handled by party candidates saying "dem should get piece of cow, not the whole cow." Witter pointed out that in the past, party officials have given many things to undecided voters. Eventually, the voter decides that the party can't give them anything more, so they switch to a new party. Witter said that the danger of the undecided voter was more acute now, as the PNP has been in power for 17 years and has given away most of what it can.

¶20. (C) Despite the scandals, the questionable record of accomplishments, the ongoing corruption, and "PNP-fatigue," PSM may well emerge victorious. Her political history is one of winning as an underdog. She should never have won her first election - deep in the heart of JLP territory. She should never have continued to win. She never should have won the leadership of the PNP. Yet, she has emerged victorious in all elections she has contested. She avoids the media, avoids specifics, and performs her duties in a way that lends credibility to charges that she does not possess the mental faculties needed to run a nation. However, her personal story and charisma consistently have trumped these charges, leading her to victory by wide margins. Her connection to "the people" can never be underestimated. A handshake, a hug, and a walk in the most economically-deprived areas keeps her in power and keeps ordinary Jamaicans convinced of "Sister P's" power to deliver them from hardship.

JOHNSON